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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAMAKO 000299

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [ML](#)

SUBJECT: MALI TALLIES ITS LOSSES FOLLOWING LATEST BATTLE  
WITH BAHANGA

REF: A. BAMAKO 00295

[1](#)B. 07 BAMAKO 01036

[1](#)C. BAMAKO 00290

[1](#)D. 07 BAMAKO 01017

[1](#)E. 07 BAMAKO 01015

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: Tuareg bandit Ibrahim ag Bahanga has  
captured as many as 45 Malian soldiers following three days  
of clashes outside of the northern Malian town of Tinzawaten.

Ten Malian soldiers may have been killed and an unknown  
number are presumed missing. Bahanga's casualties appear  
much lighter, with 5 reported killed and 3 wounded. On March  
24 Minister of Foreign Affairs Moustapha Ouane appeared before  
the diplomatic corps in Bamako to provide the Malian  
government's version of events. Ouane accused Bahanga of  
violating the informal truce that ended the last round of  
fighting in September 2007 (Ref B). He also accused Bahanga  
of violating the Geneva Convention by "attacking" a convoy of  
wounded soldiers that was traveling to Kidal under the  
protection of the International Committee of the Red Cross  
(ICRC) on March 21 - a statement disputed by the ICRC and  
individuals who accompanied the convoy. Ouane reiterated  
Mali's support for Austrian efforts to secure the release of  
two Austrian nationals held by AQIM in northern Mali (Ref C)  
but noted that Mali had yet to confirm that the hostages were  
indeed on Malian soil. Although the Malian army attempted to  
evacuate Tinzawaten during the fighting, a handful of  
government soldiers who were stranded in Tinzawaten remain in  
the garrison. As the sand settles and more details come into  
focus, questions about the Malian military's decision-making  
and chain of command are beginning to emerge. End Summary.

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Three Days of Fighting, One Rescue and 45 Hostages  
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2.(C) Details of the most recent clashes between the Malian  
military and Ibrahim ag Bahanga remain hazy as reports from  
the international media, Tuareg sources, Malian military  
contacts and the Malian government are proving more  
contradictory than complementary. Reports in the  
international media, for instance, of civilian casualties  
from a land mine incident on March 20 appear incorrect. Our  
information stems from contacts with Alliance for Democracy  
and Change spokesman Ahmada ag Bibi; Alladi ag Alla, the  
leader of 1963 Tuareg rebellion who has been in direct  
contact with Bahanga for the past week; and Assilakane ag  
Interawt, the head of the Malian Red Cross in Kidal.

3.(C) Fighting began during the night of March 19-20 when a convoy of 22 Malian military vehicles heading from Tinzawaten to Bourghessa ran into a group of Bahanga's men led by a Tuareg named (FNU) Baye. Although the Malian military described this attack as an ambush, ag Alla and others apparently warned the Malians that Bahanga was positioned along the road ahead (Ref A). Baye's group was quickly reinforced by a second group led by Bahanga. A third group, led by Hassan ag Fagaga, appeared soon after. The Malians lost as many as 8 vehicles, 2 trucks and 4 BRDMs during the fighting, which left an estimated 10 Malian soldiers dead and 40 wounded. A number of soldiers were also reported missing after they presumably fled into the desert. Five fighters on Bahanga's side were reported killed and three wounded.

4.(U) Hostilities continued into the day of March 21 when the Kidal-based Assilakane ag Interawt of the Malian Red Cross and an ICRC team drove into the battle zone. Ag Interawt and the ICRC left Tinzawaten on the morning of March 21 after having delivered 20 tons of rice and other humanitarian supplies on March 19-20 to approximately 500 families totalling roughly 2,800 internally displaced people who fled Tinzawaten in August 2007 after Bahanga's first attack on the Malian army. This group of displaced perons has spent the last seven months camped in a wadi near the Algerian frontier, 6KM from Tinzawaten. The Malian Red Cross has distributed food to them several times since the beginning of 2008.

5.(C) Confronted with dozens of wounded Malian soldiers, ag Interawt, the ICRC team and others began organizing the evacuation of approximately 35 to 40 soldiers to Kidal. Foreign Minister Ouane told the diplomatic corps that the

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convoy was organized by the ICRC and that Bahanga attacked it in violation of the Geneva convention. The ICRC Director in Dakar, Juan Coderque, however, said the ICRC did not organize the evacuation effort and that the convoy was "certainly not attacked" by Bahanga but rather "intercepted" as it was leaving the battlefield for Kidal. This corresponds with accounts provided separately by ag Alla and ag Interawt, who also said Bahanga "intercepted" the convoy.

6.(C) After what Coderque described as several hours of discussions and negotiations, Bahanga allowed the convoy to proceed with only the most seriously wounded - approximately 9 soldiers. Ag Interawt told the Embassy that he spoke personally with Bahanga to negotiate the release of the seriously wounded. Approximately 24 soldiers remained with Bahanga. Some of these are lightly wounded. Ag Interawt said others were suffering from fatigue, dehydration and hunger.

7.(C) Ag Alla, ag Bibi and other Tuareg contacts place the total number of hostages at 45 - a number that likely includes the 24 tired and wounded identified by Ag Interawt plus those who fled during the attack and were later picked up by Bahanga. Sporadic small arms fire continued through March 22, with Bahanga encircling six vehicles that escaped from fighting the previous day along with three additional cars and one BRDM dispatched from Tinzawaten. There were no reports of additional casualties. Early on March 23 Bahanga reportedly told ag Alla that he would not withdraw until the Malian military had completely evacuated Tinzawaten. Later in the day ADC leader Iyad ag Ghali, who just returned from Uganda where he traveled with President Amadou Toumani Toure to celebrate the Mawloud with Mouammar Qadhafi, reportedly asked Toure to order the Malian military to stand down. Bahanga pulled his men back a few hours later.

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Red Cross Seeks Visitation Rights  
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8.(U) The Malian Red Cross intends to visit the newly

captured hostages as early as March 26. According to ag Interawt, the Red Cross has already received the green light from the Governor of Kidal, Al Hamdou ag Illyen, the Malian army and Bahanga who is apparently eager for the Red Cross to visit his wounded as well.

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Comment: Who's In Charge Here?  
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9.(C) This is a serious defeat for the Malian military. Although leaders of Mali's Tuareg, Arab and Songhrai communities in Bamako have denounced the violence and appealed for calm, Kidal's real power-brokers, Iyad ag Ghali and the ADC remain silent. Ag Interawt said there was a "precarious calm" in the town of Kidal as residents digest the events of the past few days. A new hostage crisis and the substantial loss of military personnel and hardware will greatly increase levels of uncertainty and insecurity in the north and possibly beyond.

10.(C) The Malian military's movements around Tinzwaten appear odd given that less than three weeks ago, on March 8, Libya and Iyad ag Ghali convinced Bahanga to release the 22 Malian soldiers Bahanga had held for more than six months. One would have thought that the hostage release would have been followed by cooling-off period. To make matters worse, the contingent of Malian soldiers that ran into Bahanga on March 20 included just one northern Malian - a low-ranking Tuareg soldier who was among the severely wounded later evacuated to Kidal. Given the emphasis on mixed units of northerners and southerners as outlined by the Algiers Accords, it is surprising to learn that the Malian military is conducting movements in Mali's extreme north without relying on the cadre of Tuaregs and Arabs who remain faithful to the Malian government. This group of Tuareg and Arab soldiers, together with irregular Tuareg soldiers belonging to the ADC, played a key role in preventing the fall of the Tinzwaten garrison in August 2007 when it was last encircled by Bahanga's forces (Ref D). Had loyalist Tuaregs been present on March 19-20, the outcome could have been quite different.

11.(C) There are also questions of who is directing Malian military operations in the region of Kidal following the

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evacuation of the region's former commanding officer, Didier Dacko, who was seriously wounded in a March 13 land mine incident (Ref A). Although it seems likely that ATT was kept abreast of recent events, his absence from Mali during this critical period may have encouraged some disarray in the chain of command prior to the decision for the army to stand down on March 23. At one point during the engagement with Bahanga the Malian military ordered the evacuation of Tinzwaten. A military withdrawal from Tinzwaten constitutes one of Bahanga's key demands and is something both Mali and the U.S., with our airlift of humanitarian supplies in September 2007 (Ref E), have sought to avoid. In the end, only logistical constraints prevented the Malian military from fully evacuating the town.  
MCCULLEY